

Heritage Area Must Serve National Interest

By

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In 1996 the Congress passed and the President signed the law creating the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area. In drafting the law, I named the Hudson Valley Greenway Council and Conservancy as managers for the program and required them to develop a management plan. I chose them because they had done an excellent job of managing the Greenway and winning public support for its work. Since then, much discussion has taken place concerning the virtues of the Hudson Valley and the contributions of its people to the national purpose and spirit. A management plan has been written and revised several times, but I am deeply concerned that it does not adhere to the intent of the law.

The law has three purposes: to recognize the importance of our region's history and resources to the nation; to assist in preserving, protecting, and interpreting these resources for the benefit of the nation; and to authorize federal financial and technical assistance. Part of the law's intent was satisfied simply by its enactment. Congress and President Clinton thereby recognized the Hudson Valley as a place of special value to the nation and the Heritage Area became eligible to receive federal assistance. Intentionally left to the communities of the region to decide was the question of what specific resources should be preserved, protected, and interpreted, and how this should be done.

Of course, as is true of any region, the communities and individuals of the Hudson Valley do not speak with one voice. So tough choices must be made and not everyone will be completely happy.

It is imperative in making these decisions that the managers stick to the purposes explicitly stated in the law. The Heritage Area must focus on aspects of our history that are uniquely important to our nation as a whole, as well as to our region. And its activities must be of benefit to the entire nation. A federal program must serve a national interest to justify the appropriation of federal resources. Unfortunately, the management plan to date has not paid proper attention to this federal purpose. Perhaps most troubling about the current draft is that it makes official its departure from the law by rewriting the Heritage Area's mission statement so that it no longer agrees with the law's clearly stated purpose.

There are primarily four aspects of the Valley's history that are important to the entire nation in a way that no other region can claim. 1) Our region played a unique and crucial role in the birth of our republic. 2) It spawned the first American school of art, whose celebration of nature led directly to our system of national parks. 3) The Hudson River provided the nation's principle artery of commerce and gave rise to the State's commercial predominance. 4) The Valley was the birthplace of the modern environmental movement.

The plan should focus on projects that directly relate to these important developments in our nation's history. Instead, it delves into a wide array of activities that have nothing to do with the Heritage Area program. As a result, it provides no concrete direction for how to proceed on the few themes that are appropriately included.

If implemented correctly, the Heritage Area can have profound and enduring benefits for our region. But no single program should be relied upon to fulfill our every wish. The Heritage Area has a specific purpose and limited resources with which to accomplish it. If we do not focus the plan correctly, one of two equally unhappy outcomes will result. Either we will spread the program too thin to do any good at all, or our Heritage Area will be denied future federal funding because we failed to hold up our end of the bargain.